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Basic design edenspiekermann, Amsterdam

Typesetting: Ellen Bouma, Alkmaar

Illustration cover: The Mâyūra-nātha temple gopuram tower [photographs: Eviatar Shulman]

Preferred citation: David Shulman (2014). *Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar and the Invention of Modern Carnatic Music: The Abhayāmbā Vibhakti-kṛtis*. Amsterdam, J. Gonda Fund Foundation of the KNAW.

ISBN 978-90-6984-688-0

September 2014

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## Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar and the Invention of Modern Carnatic Music: The Abhayâmbā Vibhakti-kṛtis

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks, first, to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences for the invitation to deliver the Jan Gonda lecture and to all those who made our stay in Amsterdam so happy and productive; these include Bernadette Peeters, Pien Meijman, and Jan van Herwijnen, who has seen this lecture through to publication. I particularly want to thank my good friends Jonathan Silk and Yoko.

Roopa Mahadevan learned and sang several of the Abhayāmbā *kṛtis* at my suggestion; I was proud to play her beautiful renditions during the lecture, and they are now accessible on her website. I will never forget the September evening in Manhattan when my wife Eileen and I sat with Roopa in the Navatman Studio and heard her sing the Kalyāṇi *kṛti*; I knew at once that Roopa would give us the rich and moving performance I was hoping for. I am delighted at the partnership that has emerged in the course of this venture.

Pioneering work on the Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar corpus was carried out by Harold Powers and, with a great depth of insight, Emmie te Nijenhuis, who did me the honor of coming to hear my lecture. I have learned from these great musicologists and from our wise colleague and friend, Joep Bor; their work made my own reflections possible. I want to thank my music teachers, Pantula Rama and Osnat Elkabir, for introducing me to the tradition from the inside. My Tamil guru, John Marr, first unveiled for me, long ago, the miracle of Carnatic music. I would also like to mention the seminal works of Yoshitaka Terada and Daves Soneji on the history of south Indian performance. To all of these teachers, my debt of gratitude and delight is beyond measure.

Ilanit Shacham-Loewy graciously and selflessly plied me with rare texts from the Regenstein Library in Chicago, thus making it possible for me to write my essay. Yigal Bronner encouraged me to go deeper into the Dīkṣitar world.

My wife Eileen, a trained Carnatic singer herself, spent time listening with me to some of the *kṛtis* and discussing their intricacies with her unique sensitivity. For this, among so many gifts, I can only say the simplest words: thank you.

Jan Heesterman, a life-long friend and source of inspiration, came to hear my lecture. That was the last time I saw him. He died a few months later. I would like to dedicate this short study to his memory.

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*Abhayāmbā*

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In the last decades of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, south Indian classical music underwent a revolution, largely re-inventing itself as an artistic domain in secular settings removed from the royal courts and the great temples, its primary arenas of patronage before this point. Perhaps the most innovative figure in this revolution in taste, expressivity, and cultural context was Muttusvāmi Dikṣitar (1775-1835), a practicing Tantrika with a fondness for composing sets of eight or more compositions on a chosen goddess from a major temple in the Tamil country. This lecture focuses on one such set, to the goddess Abhayāmbā, "No Fear," in Māyilāṭuturai, and attempts to read these compositions, taken as a coherent whole, in the light of the new aesthetic this composer was creating. A musical "grammar of emergence," driven by principles of radical iconicity with the accompanying verbal text and specific and meaningful musical figuration, can be extracted inductively by careful listening to these works, which, it is argued, aim to make the goddess present through techniques I call "auralization" (in contrast to the more familiar "visualization"). The composer/performer sings the goddess into being, and the attuned listener, sitting in a precursor of the modern concert hall, internalizes her presence in his awareness along the lines the artist has carefully put in place. The pragmatic aspect of this process of mantic listening is largely forgotten today, but it informed Dikṣitar's work throughout and defined him not so much as the pious figure of current canonical narrative as, in effect, a modernist shaman who detached Carnatic music from its earlier ritual contexts and transposed it into a new, highly personal, universalist-secular mode.

Goddesses, such as Abhayāmbā, "No-Fear," of Māyavaram, have their ways. An inexplicable synchronicity marks the extended moment when Carnatic music was re-inventing itself in the forms we know today even as Western classical music was creating its canonical core in Vienna and Salzburg. In the early 1780's Mozart was composing his six so-called "Haydn Quartets" in profound conversation with Haydn's Opus 33; in these same years, in the heady atmosphere of Maṇali on the northern outskirts of the new colonial capital of Madras, the young Muttusvāmi Dikṣitar was completing his education at the feet of his father, the maverick musical genius Rāmasvāmi Dikṣitar. In the Tamil south as in Vienna, intertextual resonances comprised the very stuff and texture of composition, though we know all too little about specific quotations and elaborations by Muttusvāmi Dikṣitar of themes from the works of his slightly elder contemporaries, Tyāgarāja and (in

particular) Śyāma Śāstri. These three great composers apparently met in the political capital of Maratha Tañjāvūr and clearly were aware of one another's emerging oeuvre, the primary modern canon of the Carnatic tradition.

To state the matter in this way is, however, to be swept at once into the standard hagiography that Carnatic music likes to tell about its formative moment in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. This overly familiar story, first fully articulated in the Telugu work of Dīkṣitar's grand-nephew and adopted son Subbarāma Dīkṣitulu, the monumental *Saṅgīta-sampradāya-pradarśini*, enshrines the three composers, all born within a few years in the small temple-town of Tiruvārūr in the Kāveri Delta, as the foundational "Trinity." Yet even Subbarāma Dīkṣitulu's account is more complex and colorful than what we usually hear today. I think it is time to re-examine the self-image of Carnatic classicism, to expand its cultural and intellectual horizons, and to attempt to define the revolution in sensibility that was achieved at that creative time—that is, to specify the historical circumstances that drove it and the analytical features that dominated the formation of a new musical culture in the south. In such a wider view, Muttusvami Dīkṣitar will, I argue, emerge as the major innovator, the figure who, rather like Monteverdi in seventeenth-century Venice, can be said to have effected the major breakthrough in taste and technique.<sup>1</sup> To pose the problem as a set of questions: What was the nature of the transformation that Dīkṣitar wrought within his inherited musical tradition, and what enabled the transition into new, more modern modes of composition and performance? Who were Dīkṣitar's audiences? What processes were at work at this time? What new kinds of expressivity emerged as the hallmarks of Dīkṣitar's *kṛtis*? Or, more simply: who was this composer, and how was his inner world patterned and projected?

There are other questions I cannot begin to answer; I am a cultural historian, not a musicologist. Others will have to address the profound issues of compositional technique. At most, I hope to shed some light on the cultural matrix out of which the new music emerged. The social and cultural contexts that shaped the tradition have been studied in depth by Daves Soneji, in a pioneering book, and by Indira Peterson, Lakshmi Subrahmanian, Amanda Weidman, Saskia Kersenboom, and, in an early generation, S. Seetha, among others. Thanks to these scholars, we now know quite a lot about how south Indian music and dance crystallized in the genres and templates of "salon performance," to use Soneji's term; about the main performance lines leading back to the devadāsī-veśyā

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1 Thus Emmie te Nijenhuis and Sanjukta Gupta, *Sacred Songs of India: Dīkṣitar's Cycle of Hymns to the Goddess Kamalā* (Winterthur: Amadeus, 1987), 1:1: [Dīkṣitar was] "the most versatile and innovative of them all."



courtesans and their male counterparts, the *naṭṭuvaṇārs*, the guardians of this tradition; and about the turning-point when Carnatic music and dance reimaged themselves and successfully made the transition, not without cost, to the modern stage. We know considerably less about that earlier period when a long-standing, well articulated musical world took the first bold steps toward becoming a semi-secular art music—not as we know it today in the *sabhās* of Chennai and Rajahmundry and Vizianagaram and Kocci, but as something capable of unfolding into such later modes. This evening I want to address that earlier time of invention or reinvention and to trace some of its primary historical features, placing particular emphasis on the extraordinary figure of Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar and closely examining one set of his most sustained and intricate compositions, the *Abhayāmbā kṛtis*, arranged, like other such sets by this composer, according to the eight Sanskrit inflectional cases. To understand them we will have to have a look at their setting in the ancient temple of Māyavaram or Māyūram, today Mayilāṭuturai on the banks of the Kāveri; and we will need to revisit the Dīkṣitar biography or hagiography, putting aside the prevalent pious halo that has come to envelop this radical Tantric modernist.

#### ABHAYĀMBĀ, NO-FEAR

The Māyūranāthasvāmi Temple is situated in the heart of the Tamil temple country, on the southern bank of the Kāveri River, at a place today called by the ancient name Mayilāṭuturai, mentioned by two of the canonical Tamil Śaiva poets (Tirunāṇacampantar and Tirunāvukk'araracucuvāmikaḷ, c. seventh century), but until recently known as Māyavaram, a major town in the eastern Delta. It's an imposing shrine, endowed with Chola-period donative inscriptions (late eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries). Large parts of the older, Chola-period edifice have been removed in the course of extensive renovations, some in Vijayanagara times, others as recently as 1928. As usual, the ritual order at the temple seems to have survived intact from medieval times. I can touch here only on a few high points of direct relevance to our topic. The large Māyūranātha liṅga, embedded in a series of receding door-frames as one moves from the outer *prākāram* into the inner ones, has been replicated by four other Māyūranāthas, one for each of the cardinal directions: on the east, *Turai kāṭṭum vaḷḷal*, the Generous Lord who Shows the Crossing; to the south, in *Pēruñceri*, *Vākkū kāṭṭum vaḷḷal*, the Generous Lord who Gave his Word (to *Bṛhaspati*, chief of the 8000 sages in the Forest of Pines); to the west, in *Mūvaṇūr*, *Mārgasahāyar*, the Lord who Helps One on the Way; and to the north, in *Uttaramāyūram*,

Kai kātṭum vaḷḷal, the Generous Lord who Showed his Hand (in the gesture of silent teaching).

One sees at a glance that this god is a source of bounty and benefice pouring out freely in all directions, also inwards as well as outwards, and concretized in specific iconic forms. He points to the place of crossing, and he helps the pilgrim find his way. In a sense—already clearly articulated in the *Tevāram* poems on this shrine—he is the male condensation and equivalent of the freely flowing, generous gift of the Kāveri River, thought to be so rich in benefice that the Ganges herself came down from north India to worship her here. We should no doubt think of the stone liṅgas that capture parts or aspects of the god as liquid and unconfined, like the river.

Here is Mayilāṭuturai, where the peacock plays  
and the lord sings as he begs for alms  
from the heart of every young woman.  
We know all of ancient time  
is his. Here the Kāviri scatters gems  
on her banks, covered in foam,  
as bees sip honey from mangos  
torn open by monkeys who leap  
from branch to branch.<sup>2</sup>

Music is the third level of gushing, flowing goodness, perhaps flowing into the river, the first and primary level, and also into and out of the god and mixing with the rush of feeling in “the heart of every young woman,” the second liquid strand. Elsewhere, in a similar vein, Appar tells us that this Lord of the Peacock is a perennial bridegroom, *maṇāḷaṇār*.<sup>3</sup>

But, as usual in south India, the male deity is also vulnerable to forms of relatively severe self-obstruction, or encrustation, hence to extreme fragmentation. Mayilāṭuturai is one of the “seven sites” (*sapta-sthānam*) in the Delta<sup>4</sup> that share an annual festival aimed at recomposing, or coalescing, the god who has been divided among them. To facilitate this business of reuniting the disparate pieces of a shattered deity is perhaps the main task of the goddess—in our case,

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2 Tiruñāṇacampan̄tar 3. 70. 5.

3 Tirunāvukk'aracucuvāmikaḷ 6.59.4 (Tiruvēṇṇiyūr).

4 See list in Cāmināt'aiyar's introduction to *Tirumayilait tirip'antāti* [Tiruvanmiyur: U. Ve. Cāmināt'aiyar Library, 1997], xiii.

Abhayâmbā, No Fear (Tamil Añcōlāl).<sup>5</sup> Although she, too, is subject to fissiparous currents within her “self” and her world, she is also, as we will see, continuous and complete in self and thus always potentially helpful to human beings who seek her out. I witnessed her astonishing interaction with her devotees at the time of the evening prayer, *pradoṣa-pūjā*, when I last visited Māyavaram (August 2013). The lighting of the lamps in her sanctuary, seen through the set of stone gateways, sends high-voltage signals of her loving presence, and the pilgrims fan the flames with their prayers.

She stands, black, draped in three white, hanging garlands or necklaces, the top one issuing into a brilliant gem at its nadir. A huge garland of lotuses, garnished with orange blossoms, surrounds her head and shoulders, flowing down the sides of her body. Above her, above the inner chamber, there is light glowing inside a circle of lights. She seems peaceful, dignified, graceful, a little reserved. Green dominates the green and red sari she wears. A vast, unruly *kīrti-mukha* monster protects the entrance to this inner space. She has four arms: discus on the top right, conch on the top left; the lower left hand rests on her waist, the lower right is raised in the familiar abhaya gesture: No Fear. A green parrot rests on her right shoulder. The entire image is suffused with resonances of Viṣṇu, so much so that one wonders if an original Viṣṇu deity has been replaced by, or absorbed into, this female form, thus obscuring the symbiotic Śiva-Viṣṇu pattern so pronounced in Tamil shrines such as Tiruvārūr and Cidambaram, among many others.

At the entrance to the sanctum, on the left, there is a large, clean mirror, and just below it sindūra powder is held, ready for use, by a carved male figure, bending under the weight. It seems the mirror is to see yourself after you’ve taken the powder and applied it to your forehead—that is, to see yourself as this goddess, as she sees herself in you. Here is but one of the Tantric touches that color the Abhayâmbā shrine. Indeed, it is clear that Māyūranātha and his consort have undergone a phase of systemic Tantricization, in at least two distinct stages—an initial assimilation of the Kashmiri Āgamas into the ritual structure of the shrine, probably in late Chola times, and a later reworking of the entire system of myth and cult in terms consonant with the mature Śrī-vidyā—probably in

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5 The Tamil name occurs, probably originally as a simple epithet (“Umā of beautiful speech”), in Tirunāvukḱ’aracucuvāmikaḷ *Tevāram* 5.39.4 [389]. Añcōlāl may have become, or been glossed as, Añcal nāyaki, “Don’t-be-Afraid-Goddess” (see commentary to the Tarumapuram edition on this verse), perhaps in conjunction with her Vaiṣṇava features: see below.

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The latter process culminates in the Dīkṣitar *kṛtis*, today inscribed on the walls of this goddess shrine, that will concern us here.

Perhaps the most striking and unusual feature of this entire process, one unique to the Māyavaram complex, is the role of Anavidyā/ Anavidyāmbikai (“Non-non-aware”), a goddess-as-liṅga standing on a raised stone platform to the left of the Abhayāmbā shrine. The black liṅga is decked at its base with a red sari that then rises to enfold its left side. According to the *Tala-varalāru*,<sup>6</sup> each day a new red sari is attached to this liṅga on its right side. I counted six other saris, of various colors, hanging on a string on the wall to the right, and three more, orange and nicely ironed, to the left. An oil lamp burns at the right base of the liṅga. On the wall behind her (him), we find the *liṅgodbhava*, and Dakṣiṇāmūrti stands, where he should be, on the wall to the left. A peacock adorns a pillar at the entrance to her shrine—not by coincidence.

Who is she/he? The story is that Anavidyā's husband, Nātha-śarma, a Siddha alchemist-Yogi, came to Māyavaram with his wife and brought the Tiruvaiyāru temple (north of Tañjāvūr) with him (a Pañca-nadiśvara temple, patterned after Tiruvaiyāru, does indeed exist in the village). Eventually, Nātha-śarma became a liṅga in the god's shrine, and Anavidyā, too, was transformed into a liṅga; it is still customary for pilgrims to worship both liṅgas before they turn to the main deities.<sup>7</sup> Siddhas excel above all at self-deification.<sup>8</sup> But we are left, still, with the seeming incongruity of a female liṅga that has achieved a certain primacy in the ritual order here. Moreover, this liṅga stands between Māyūranātha, in his separate shrine, and Abhayāmbā, its immediate neighbor, almost as if Anavidyā were another, parallel form of No-Fear. Anavidyā, in a sense, takes the place that should be reserved for the male consort. But what kind of a male is she? The texts offer no explanation. It is quite common in Tamil Śaivism to see Viṣṇu—in the identity of Mohinī, the Enchantress— as the left half of Śiva, and we have seen that Abhayāmbā does bear Vaiṣṇava iconic features. But is Anavidyā, then, the male half of this female half? And is the male half of a female half male or female, or both, or neither? Can femaleness be bifurcated in this way? As we

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6 Vai. Ambikapati, *Tirumayilāṭuṭurai tiruttala varalāru* (Tirumayilāṭuṭurai: Published by the author, 2008), 54; K. Chockalingam, *Census of India 1961, XI-D, Temples of Tamil Nadu* (1971), 55-56. See *Tirumayilait tirup'antāti* of Irāmaiyar (Madras: U. Ve. Caminataiyar Nūnilaiyam, 1997), v. 11.

7 Cāmināt'aiyar tells us that the custom in his day was for pilgrims to visit these two *liṅgas* after first worshipping Caṇṭikecuvarar and Caṇṭikecuvari: *loc. cit.*

8 Māyūram was also the primary site for the Siddha known as Kutampaiccittar, whose *samādhi* is here: see Ampikāpati, *Tirumayilāṭuṭurai tiruttala varalāru*, 51.



*Mayilāṭṭurai: Brahma-tīrtha, Māyūranātha-svāmi Temple*

will see, these questions arise again in the musical texts of Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar on this goddess.

Often, in south Indian shrines, metaphysical quandaries of this sort are embodied in stone, not set to rest in discursive words. We will not attempt to solve the riddle here. But we can, at the least, note the rather unorthodox experiment that Abhayāmbā has apparently attracted to herself, and the at once ravishing and unsettling quality of this deity. We should bear this set of elements in mind when we turn to the Dīkṣitar compositions about her, by now a canonical statement of her nature, history, and internal dynamics.

I have still not mentioned the main purāṇic story about Māyūra-nātha and Abhayāmbā. The setting is Dakṣa's sacrificial ritual, to which he deliberately did not invite his son-in-law, Śiva. Umā, Dakṣa's daughter, insisted on going in order to defend her husband's honor. When Śiva sent the furious part of himself, Vīrabhadra, to wreck the rite, a peahen who happened to be there rushed to Umā for refuge; and Umā, who was burnt to death in this destructive moment, held fast to this peahen, trying to save her. Since this was the last thought of the goddess before her immolation, she was reborn as a peahen and, in this form,

worshiped Śiva until he came to marry her and merge her with himself. The destruction of the sacrifice took place at Pariyalūr, one of the eight *vīraṭṭānam* or heroic sites of Tamil Śaivism—only some five kilometers away from Māyavaram. The goddess as peahen emerged at Māyavaram, where her husband-to-be appeared as a dancing peacock to claim her; this identity is preserved in his name, Māyūra-nātha.<sup>9</sup>

Abhayāmbā takes other forms as well: she is Āṭippūra Ammaṇ, “the goddess of the floods in the month of Āṭi,” diagonally situated to the north-east of Abhayāmbā in her primary iconic form (remember that the goddess is deeply linked to the flowing river, which she visits in the Aippaci festival days); and she is also identified with the canonical Tantric deities Lalitāmbikā and Tripura-sundarī, whose huge portraits have been painted on the walls behind Abhayāmbā along with a painted image of Samayapuram Māriyamman, a third Tantrified deity (in the Samaya, not the Kaula, stream). It is in the form of Tripura-sundarī that we will encounter her in the Dīkṣitar compositions, which fuse specific features of the Māyavaram goddess with the more generalized and universally familiar, materializations of the Śrī-vidyā. A significant corpus of Tamil poems about Māyavaram, from the seventeenth century on, explored such identifications, along with others centered on the male deity, Māyūranātha.<sup>10</sup>

There are striking continuities between Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar, in the late eighteenth century, and local Māyavaram poets such as the now largely forgotten, but enormously creative, Irāmaiyar, probably a generation before him.<sup>11</sup> The composer, blending verbal and musical texts, is doing what the Tamil poet is trying to do; both seek to reveal in sensible form, visual, audible, or tangible, a living goddess who inhabits both external and internal domains. Or perhaps the composer is attempting to *outdo* such a poet by means of the musical devices he commands. In terms of the aesthetic goals of composition, both operate within a world where sound impacts upon, indeed shapes, reality and can be manipulated by the poet or musician to particular effect, although Dīkṣitar's Tantric orientation moves beyond Irāmaiyar's somewhat less radical stance and aims at certain distinctive effects, as we will see.

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9 *Māyūrappurāṇam* of Tiricirapuram Mīnāṭcicuntaram Piḷḷai (edition made available by Project Madurai, 2011) chapters 9-11 (in particular 9.47, 10. 21-26). See *Tirumayilai tirip'antāti* of Irāmaiyar 10.

10 Some of these works appear to have been lost, including an *ulā* by Tuṟaimaṅkalam Velaiyacuṇvāmi, the brother of the more famous Civappirakācar.

11 This poet's *Tirumayilai tirup'antāti*, mentioned above, deserves close study in its own right and as a precursor of Dīkṣitar's musical experiments with the Māyavaram deities.

From this point on, our main interest lies in the pragmatics of Dīkṣitar's set of *kṛtis* in performance and the historical milieu that shaped the composition of these works. To understand what this means, we need to revisit the Dīkṣitar biography in its standard form.

#### MUTTUSVĀMI DĪKṢITAR: MODERN SHAMAN

Most of what we know, or think we know, about this composer is derived from an account by his famous grand-nephew, Subbarāya Dīkṣitulu, in his compendium of classical Carnatic music and, in particular, of the Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar corpus, the *Saṅgīta-sampradāya-pradarśini* (in Telugu, the primary language of this musical tradition), published in Eṭṭayapuram in the southern Tamil country in 1904. Subbarāya Dīkṣitulu was the grandson of Muttusvāmi's younger brother, Bālusvāmi, who had his own connection to the small-scale royal court in Eṭṭayapuram (where Muttusvāmi died in 1835). We have virtually no way to cross-check the information the grand-nephew gives about his great relative; moreover, the account itself is laconic and drifts into the prevalent hagiographic mode that has colored our understanding of many of the great Carnatic composers. Some details, however, are too specific to have been invented; and, taken as a whole, this "biography" does offer an eloquent image of Muttusvāmi in which certain critical features come, perhaps without the author's intention, into focus. In what follows, I take the Subbarāya text as a useful starting point for a series of biographical remarks on the early, formative period in the composer's life.

Muttusvāmi was the son of Rāmasvāmi Dīkṣitar, an unusually gifted and versatile musician with strong links both to the Tiruvārūr temple and to the Tañjāvūr Maratha court. He has to his credit a serious of virtuoso compositions, including perhaps the longest single work in the entire Carnatic tradition, the *Aṣṭottara-śata-rāga-tāla-mālikā*, which runs through 108 ragas and tālas whose names are embedded in the Telugu verbal text.<sup>12</sup> Muttusvāmi's father is also credited with stabilizing the system of rāgas in liturgical use at the Tiruvārūr temple, including specifying the time of day suited for each rāga's performance (a feature which, as is well known, has disappeared from the modern concerts). Subbarāya tells us that Muttusvāmi was born in Tiruvārūr in 1775 after his

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12 See R. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, *History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music* (Madras: Published by the author, 1972). 215; V. Raghavan, *Muthuswamy Dikshitar* (Bombay: National Centre for the Performing Arts, 1975), 1. This *mālikā* has survived only in part.



parents, desperate for a child, went on pilgrimage to the shrine of the god Mutu-kumāra-svāmi in Vaittiśvaraṅkoyil; the god gave them the child as his special act of grace, and this gift is embodied in the name chosen for the boy. Note the importance of Kumāra-svāmi at the very moment of conception. Muttusvāmi was educated in Vedādhyayana, poetry, drama, and poetics (*kāvya*, *nāṭaka*, and *alaṅkāra*), grammar (*kaumudī*), commentaries, and music, and we are told that he achieved deep erudition in astrology, medicine ([*Āyur*]/*vaidyamu*), and *māntrikamu*.<sup>13</sup> The final term—not by chance the culmination of the entire series—must mean a proficiency in the practical mantric sciences of south Indian Tantra. We need to take this evidence seriously, as it offers one of the keys to understanding the composer's life and work.

While Muttusvāmi was still a boy, the family shifted to Maṇali, a northern suburb of the newly emergent colonial metropolitan center of Madras. In Maṇali Rāmasvāmi was lavishly patronized by Venkatakrishna Mudaliyar (also known as Chinayya), who had inherited his father Muddukrishna's job as dubhash—interpreter/executive agent—for the East India Company. We have supporting evidence about the clearly vibrant cultural atmosphere in Maṇali at the end of the eighteenth century:<sup>14</sup> and we know for certain that the young Muttusvāmi was exposed here to Western music. In later years he composed works, known today as *noṭṭusvaram*, based on a series of popular English and Irish ditties, including “God Save the King.” Bālusvāmi, the younger brother, also learned violin in Maṇali and became perhaps the main source of the violin's omnipresence in South Indian concerts today. Colonial Maṇali, with its *nouveau riches* and secularized middle class, provides the paradigm for the revolution in audience and musical taste with which Muttusvāmi is most closely associated. We will return to this point.

It was at Maṇali, according to Subbarāya, that the young Muttusvāmi first met a wandering Tantric Yogi named Cidambaranātha, a practitioner of the Śrīvidyā. We are told—this is clearly the family tradition—that this Tantric master took Muttusvāmi with him as his disciple on a five-year pilgrimage to Varanasi, where the budding musician was thoroughly instructed in the intricacies of the Śrīvidyā and was initiated into the worship of the goddess Tripurasundarī. The grand-nephew says clearly: “In these five years he (Cidambaranātha)

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13 *Śaṅgīta-sampradāya-pradarśini* 1:26.

14 My thanks to V. Sriram for detailed notes on early colonial Maṇali. See also Kanakalatha Mukund, *The View from Below: Indigenous Society, Temples and the Early Colonial State in Tamilnadu 1700-1835* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2005), 66-70; Daves Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 245.



gradually gave his student “powers” (*siddhi*) through practicing the mantras; he made him master eight *mahāsiddhis* and, realizing that he was a great man (*mahā-puruṣuniḡān ěrigi*), taught him the Vedānta-śāstra in the experiential mode (*anubhavamuto*).<sup>15</sup> Muttusvāmi, now an accomplished practitioner, took leave of his teacher and returned to Maṇali, where he lived a life of “internal and external sacrifice” (*antar-yāga-bahir-yāgamulu*), that is, both the meditative/imaginative practices of visualization and the daily rituals of fashioning the goddess and making her present.<sup>16</sup> Let us take note of this phrase; “internal and external sacrifice” is the way the family tradition described the praxis of the young composer-to-be. We will revisit this particular statement at a later point in this essay.

Following the standard hagiographical template, Subbarāya tells us that the next step—the moment when this earnest young Tantrika became a composer—occurred during a visit to the Murugan-Kumāra shrine of Tiruttaṇi in northern Tamilnadu. The god himself, Cēṅgalvarāyaḡu, appeared in human form, ordered Muttusvāmi to open his mouth, placed a sweet on his tongue, and disappeared. Muttusvāmi at once broke out in song—first the well-known *kṛti* *Śrīgurunāthādi-guru-guho jayati* in Māyā mālavagauḡa rāga, followed by seven more compositions, each referring to the god in another of the Sanskrit nominal cases (*vibhakti*). That was the beginning.

Let us take a moment to understand what this story is telling us. It comes as no surprise that the composer's talent comes directly from God. More interesting is the highly specific Tantric background present almost from the beginning of Muttusvāmi's life, as well as the intimate link with the god Kumāra, the primary patron in the Tamil world of sorcerers, alchemists, and specialists in the pragmatics of Tantric ritual in its most individualistic forms. This composer was actually conceived, according to family tradition, through the active intervention of this deity, who is also responsible for the irreversible trajectory of his creative musical activity. It is also telling that the composer's very first compositions constitute a set of eight *vibhakti-kṛtis*, like the Abhayāmbā set among others, and that the first is set in the foundational rāga that still serves all novices in Carnatic music. In short: here is a composer—widely educated in music of various streams (including Hindustani classical performance, which he is supposed to have learned in Varanasi)—given to playful experimentation, intent upon Tantric praxis in its most immediate and effectual forms, though trained in Vedāntic interpretations of the Śrī-vidyā in the Tañjāvūr non-dualist (Advaitic) mode, with a predilection for composing sets of internally

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15 Subbarāma Dīkṣitulu, *Saṅgīta-sampradāya-pradarśini* 1:27.

16 Following Bhāskara-rāya on the *Bhāvanā Upaniṣad*: see below.

unified *kṛtis*, in Sanskrit (and not Telugu or Tamil), and so intimately linked to the patron deity of alchemists and magically potent Yogis that he carries the name and, in effect, the vital seed of this god. Muttusvāmi chose for himself a signature-name, Guruguha, that appears in all the *kṛtis*—once again, a Murugan-Kumāra epithet from local, Tamil mythology, specifically from the shrine of Cuvāmimalai near Kumbhakoṇam, where Kumāra-Guha became the teacher of Brahmā himself and thus came to serve as the model for an esoteric master (< *guha*, the secret).<sup>17</sup> Finally, Dīkṣitar's earliest work is identified with foundational features of the modern musical system in the south. We could hardly ask for a more precise profile of this composer; all that remains is for us to take it seriously and tease out its implications.

Already the conventionally pious image of Muttusvāmi seems a little anachronistic, to say the least. I think it's very clear, even before we start listening to his works, that we are dealing not with a devotionalist in the style of Muttusvāmi's contemporary, Tyāgarāja, among others, but with a much less tame, even borderline heterodox figure, a visionary innovator who went beyond even his highly inventive father. Add to this picture the later influence on Muttusvāmi—we again follow Subbarāya—of the famous Advaita composer and Upaniṣadic commentator Upaniṣad Brahmam, a major figure in the prehistory of modern Carnatic music and another exemplar of the eighteenth-century Tañjāvūr Tantra-tinted Advaita perspective.<sup>18</sup> To clarify a little: I am speaking of an active Advaita-Tantra fusion, very characteristic of Maratha-period Tanjavur, in which a non-dualist metaphysical frame opens up to reveal a fascination with *saguṇa*, that is, embodied, tangible, visible, and audible deities at home both in the great temples and in the practitioner's mind and susceptible to ritual practice aimed at bringing them into some form of tangible, sensual presence.

A categorical divide opens up at this point, though we cannot explore it in detail here. Like the Māyūra-nātha temple, discussed earlier, all the major Śaiva temples in the Tamil south were “Tantrified” in the sense, first, that they assimilated the canonical Āgamic ritual order to their daily praxis and then, even more dramatically, that north-Indian Śaiva-Śākta metaphysical notions came to color, and rationalize, primary conceptual schemata applied to the deity situated in the shrine.<sup>19</sup> Muttusvāmi spent much of his adult life composing songs directed to these temple deities; and, as we know, his family was

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17 *Kantapurāṇam* of Kacciappacivācāriyar 1.17.

18 Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, *History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music*, 221-222.

19 See V.K. Rajamani and D. Shulman, *The Mucukunda Murals in the Tyāgarājasvāmi Temple, Tiruvārūr* (Chennai: Prakriti Foundation, 2012), introduction.

no stranger to the Tiruvārūr temple, the focus of a large segment of his works. But by late-medieval or early-modern times, major Tantrika theorists and commentators were at work in the Kāveri region outside the temples, teaching and practicing as individual gurus, often of a pronounced non-conformist and individualist cast, and creating or perpetuating their own lines of authority and transmission. They embodied a rich world of study and practice still largely unknown to modern scholarship. There is reason to believe that many of these lines of initiation derived from earlier Deccani lineages, in both the Telugu area to the east and the Kannada-Marathi region to the west. Dīkṣitar, as the story tells us, aligned himself with one or more of these independent lineages on the edges of orthodox Tamil Śaivism and is best seen as continuing their vision—and also as transforming it. Bhāskara-rāya, who followed the Maratha kings to the Tañjāvūr region, is a good example of the phenomenon, although the Dīkṣitar “biography” carefully positions the young composer in the tradition of Upaniṣad Brahman, Bhāskararāya's more orthoprax (*samayācāra*) contemporary. Many of the Dīkṣitar texts reveal his identification with the *samaya*, that is, the non-*kaula*, traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Whether samayins or kaulins, these practicing Tantrikas belong to a milieu that we could easily characterize, using a cross-cultural analytical term, as “shamanic,” in the sense that they follow the standard ritualized progression beginning with “a shift away from everyday experience and perception towards a radically different realm of being,” then moving through a phase of “radical transformation and empowerment,” and ultimately returning to “consensual reality and impacting it” through the heightened existential means that have been acquired.<sup>21</sup> The third, critical phase makes these practitioners far less subversive than one might think; in effect, they tend rather to sustain a homeostatic social order, as one can see by their close relations with the political center at Tañjāvūr. But we should not underestimate their radical image as magically potent mavericks: Bhāskara-rāya is said to have refrained from bowing to a passing Yogi lest he, Bhāskara-rāya, engulf the ascetic in flames by this simple bodily act. He is also supposed to have been capable of enumerating by name

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20 See Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 28. In the Abhayāmbā series, *Girijayā* in Śaṅkarābharaṇam makes clear the composer's *samayācāra* affiliation.

21 The definitions are taken from Jonathan Garb, “Saints and Shamans in Modern Kabbalah” (2013) and *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press: 2011), 3-11.

and distinctive attribute each of the 640 million Yoginī goddesses of the Kaula system.<sup>22</sup>

The Advaita-Śrīvidyā nexus with its associated forms of practice is one major vector in the life story we are pursuing. The second, a mainly musical one, leads back through the composer's father to the systematizer and theoretician of the rāgas, Veṅkaṭa-makhin (via Veṅkaṭa-makhin's grandson, Muttu Veṅkaṭa-makhin), and to the now mostly forgotten composer, Meḷattūr Vīrabhadrayya.<sup>23</sup> This musicological pedigree was not the only one available in Tiruvarur and Tanjavur at the end of the eighteenth century, though none of its competing lines could claim the same prestige and authority. Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar is the figure who brought this genealogy to its highest point.

Subbarāya's portrait of his grand-uncle ignores major strands of the wider cultural and intellectual matrix of the musical revolution that Dīkṣitar largely pioneered. A more complete account would focus on the huge corpus of *padams* in Telugu and Tamil, reaching a high point with Kṣetrayya in the mid-seventeenth century, performed and preserved by courtesans;<sup>24</sup> on the newly emergent and immensely popular genre of "operatic" works, such as Aruṇācalak-kavirāyar's *Irāma-nāṭakak-kīrttaṇai*; on antinomian and eccentric poet-singers such as Tāyumaṇavar (first half of the eighteenth century), rooted in what I have called the "intellectual context of Tantric esotericism, alchemy, and magic;"<sup>25</sup> on the musicological texts produced at the Tañjāvūr courts, on the one hand, and in remote regions of Telugu-speaking Rāyalasīma, on the other (as we see, for example, in Bhaṭṭumūrti's great work, the *Vasu-caritramu*); and, as Daves Soneji is showing us, on the bhajan tradition imported from the Western Deccan. The new musical idiom of the late eighteenth century did not arise *ex nihilo*; indeed, many elements in the implied grammar of performance that I will attempt to define were already in place, in embryonic forms, in the works of Dīkṣitar's predecessors. We have argued that major structural changes took place in Nāyaka Tañjāvūr and Madurai, including a merging of the hitherto discrete domains of

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22 See the biographical notes by Brooks 1990: 30-31.

23 S. Seetha, *Tanjore as a Seat of Music (During the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)* (Madras: University of Madras, 1981), 153-154; Subbarāya Dīkṣitulu, *Saṅgīta sampradāya pradarśini*, 1:13.

24 See Matthew Allen and T. Viswanathan, *Music in South India: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91-95; Velcheru Narayana Rao, A.K. Ramanujan, and D. Shulman, *When God is a Customer. Telugu Courtesan Songs by Kṣetrayya and Others*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

25 D. Shulman, "The Yogi's Human Self: Tāyumaṇavar in the Tamil Mystical Tradition," *Religion* (1991), 69.

royal court and temple (with corresponding transformation of the main institutional carriers of these domains, in particular the royal patron and the *veśyā* courtesan-performer);<sup>26</sup> for the first time in south Indian history, the king absorbed a divine identity, and the courtesan now served him in this new persona along with the deity in the temple. The far-reaching interpenetration of these domains impacted on all forms of artistic production: the court assimilated styles and contents proper to the context of temple ritual, and the musical repertoire of the great temple *meḷams*, as in Tiruvārūr, gradually regulated itself to fit courtly norms. Add to this process the appearance of secular, colonial venues, with their middle-class audiences, like Maṇali toward the end of the eighteenth century, and the deepening, enlivening effect of Tantric esotericism on these venues as well as at the royal courts, as described above, and you begin to see the contours of the new cultural order that provided the background to Dīkṣitar's work.

In the light of this thick cultural and cultic background, before leaving the Dīkṣitar biography and turning to the Abhayāmbā set, we need to flesh out a little the intertextual environment within which the composer worked—although, as mentioned earlier, it is not always easy to reconstruct the specific resonances. In the case of the Abhayāmbā *kṛtis*, however, we can assume that Dīkṣitar was familiar with Shāhaji's composition on “our” goddess, Abhayāmbā (*Ammā varamul' immā* in *Gaulipantu*) and also with another work by this king, on Kamalāmbā from Tiruvārūr (*Na mīda parāku ceya* in *Gauri*).<sup>27</sup> It is not impossible that the Dīkṣitar Abhayāmbā works respond directly to Shāhaji's. Dīkṣitar quotes (and apparently set to music) his master Upaniṣad Brahman's Rāmāṣṭapadi;<sup>28</sup> and there is the tradition that a *pada-varṇa* in śrīrañjani (*Sāmi ninna*) by Rāmasvāmi Dīkṣitar, our composer's father, was completed by Muttusvāmi, his brother Cinnasvāmi, and Śyāma Śāstri, apparently at the time when both Muttusvāmi and Śyāma Śāstri were living on West Main Street in Tañjāvūr.<sup>29</sup>

26 Velcheru Narayana Rao, D. Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nāyaka Period Tamilnadu*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1992.

27 Te Nijenhuis and Gupta, *Sacred Songs*, 1:90, citing an essay by G. Ananta Subrahmanyam, “Sri Sāhaji mahārājāvin apūrva-kīrtanaikaḥ, *Journal of the Madras Academy of Music* 37 (1966), 69-74; on Shahaji as composer, see also Seetha 1981: 69-85.

28 See Subbrarāya Dīkṣitulu, *Śaṅgita sampradāya pradarśini*, 1:27; te Nijenhuis and Gupta, *Sacred Songs*, 1:117; V. Raghavan, *Muttuswamy Dikshitar* (Bombay: National Centre for the Performing Arts, 1975), 1.

29 Raghavan, *Muthuswamy Dikshitar*, 9; T. M. Krishna, *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story* (Chennai: Harper/Collins, 2014), 493.

Moreover, Muttusvāmi's great compositions on Kāmākṣī of Kāñcīpuram refer to Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī, Śyāma Śāstri's *iṣṭa-devatā* and the addressee of many of his *kṛtis*—almost certainly a deliberate gesture on the part of the younger composer to his senior contemporary. Oral paratextual criticism embodied in such traditions, like the systemic world of *cāṭu* verses we have studied,<sup>30</sup> attests eloquently to the dense matrix out of which this early-modern music crystallized together with its verbal texts. Here is one corpus with which we can work as we attempt to understand what was radically new in the late eighteenth century, and how much carried over to the new context of performance from the mutually embedded worlds of court and temple.

#### DEFINING THE NEW SENSIBILITY (1): ĀRYĀM ABHAYĀMBĀM

To draw in the contours of this powerful *mélange* is one task; to attempt to characterize the radical shift in sensibility that Dīkṣitar's music reveals is quite another. This music, which we now think of as canonical, is light years away from the courtly *padams* and *varṇams* or the temple *meḷam* performances of the mid-eighteenth century. Certain principles can be stated as we move into specific texts: what we are seeing is the creation of a new form of art music, accessible to the emergent middle class of the small towns and zamindari estates of the far south and expressive of at least one major strand of their metaphysical world. The musical form—the mature *kīrtana*—has been transformed, in ways I will seek to define; it has also been detached from its liturgical setting and transformed into a genre fit for concert performances of a relatively intimate nature (nothing like the great public spaces of the temples, on the one hand, or the large concert halls of twentieth-century Madras, on the other). At the same time, the highly active theurgic praxis proper to the worship of a Tantric goddess in the Śrīvidyā tradition has survived in a special form: singing the *kīrtana* both manifests this goddess tangibly in the interactive and intersubjective space of the concert and gives specific expression to her nature and attributes, her awareness, and her intricate relations with the poet-singer who brings her into being. Just how this works remains to be seen; I will suggest a possible historical trajectory below, after addressing some passages in our texts. We should, in any case, take seriously what Dīkṣitar tells us—for example, the fact that at least two, or perhaps three, parties to the process reflect one another.

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30 Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment: Remembered Verses from Premodern South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

As Dīkṣitar says in the Kalyāṇi composition: Abhayāmbā is *ātma-rūpa-pratibimbā*...[“counter-image of the inner self”]: a mingled innerness, becoming audible, allows the human reflection to transpose itself into the godly one. This means, in effect, among other things, that a pronounced personal, subjective voice colors each one of the compositions and seeks the appropriate musical means to express itself.

I will be speaking of a grammar of performance which, I think, underlies the cultural shift we are trying to understand. Dīkṣitar himself uses the phrase *nāda-laya-gati*, “processed through (subtle) sound and rhythm”, to describe Abhayāmbā (in the Kedāra-gauḷa *kṛti*), thus adumbrating our notion. But let us be clear about what a term like “grammar” might mean. With some hesitation, I will have to differ here from the lucid analytical distinctions drawn by the late Harold S. Powers in an essay on two of Dīkṣitar's *kṛtis* on Tiruvārūr:

“Dīkṣitar's texts, though sometimes cryptic, touch on things which have names (*nāma*) because they have forms (*rūpa*), like any other verbal discourse. His musical patterns, conversely, are linked with verbal forms, but not with semantic substance. Larger musical divisions are correlated with grammar and syntax, but not with meaning. Rhythmic patterns are linked with the sounds of words, but not with their sense. The pitch contours of the melodies are still more independent of the texts, in a characteristically Indian way.”<sup>31</sup>

No one would doubt that musical patterns, including rhythm and pitch, have a life and logic of their own and cannot be linked in mechanical ways to the semantics of the verbal text (any more than they could be in a Bach cantata). And yet to rule out “semantic substance” as a feature of musical patterns is to miss the pragmatics of *kīrtana* performance. One has always to bear in mind the aural construction and activation of a divine presence, especially in the Śrī-vidyā compositions such as those on Abhayāmbā, Kamalāmbā, Nilotpalāmbā, and others. Melody, rhythm, pitch, phrasing, sequence, tonal texture, and especially musical repetition are the building blocks of the entire endeavor, which I will be calling “auralization,” the eighteenth-century southern Tantric concomitant of and/or substitute for the more commonly discussed “visualization.”

At the very least, the attuned listener rapidly identifies diagnostic “signature” patterns that fit the goddess in a particular *rāga*, with its concomitant mood

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31 Harold S. Powers, “Musical Art and Esoteric Theism: Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar's *Ānandabhairavi Kīrtanams* on Śiva and Śakti at Tiruvarur,” in *Discourses on Śiva*, edited by M. Meister. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984: 319-20.



and temporal slot. Beyond such personal “signatures”—which are not unusual in Western music, either—one is continuously surprised by links between verbal and musical texts that can only be intrinsic. I will refer broadly to such links as “iconic” in the discussion that follows. As I hinted earlier, such iconic features binding musical sound with semantics are omnipresent in Tamil poetry in performance. Good listeners experience such linkages almost effortlessly, even if they cannot articulate them as such. Powers himself hints at certain iconic effects in his essay, and he comes close to formulating the underlying principle when he says, in a summation to which all would subscribe: “Grammatical and syntactic continuity, semantic content, and melodic-rhythmic continuity are carefully coordinated” [in Carnatic compositions, DS].<sup>32</sup> “Coordination,” however, goes well beyond iconicity in a narrow sense and includes grammatical and figurative processes such as transposition/inflection, hypotactic subordination, bitextual superimposition (*śleṣa*), *yamaka*-repetition, aural rebus devices, *antādi* ring-patterns (coincidence of verse-final and verse-initial sounds), vertical responsion,<sup>33</sup> and similar figures of sound and sense, all transpiring in the space created by the interaction of verbal and musical texts. Moreover, all instances of melodic and rhythmic repetition—the very heart of the musical process—configure or map the subject who is coming closer, in recursive, often asymmetrical patterns, as the song is sung. But what space does she inhabit? Where can we find her?

Let us, for now, go back to Abhayāmbā and see if we can identify singular features of her existence and awareness. We have seen that she has Vaiṣṇava attributes; that she is positioned beside the ambiguous female *liṅga* of Anavidyā, a shadow self of Abhayāmbā's; that she is one particularly ravishing condensation of Tripura-sundarī, “most beautiful in the cosmos,” and as such accessible through the mantras and yantras of this goddess; that she attracts and focuses the passionate attention of pilgrims to the Māyavaram shrine day by day, especially in the evening *pradoṣa pūjā* and, with particular energy, in the great autumn Tulā-kāveri festival (see below). To these selected elements we need now to add that she is, for the most part, an afternoon-evening goddess. No less than six of the ten Abhayāmbā compositions proper were, in the days

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32 *Ibid.* 322. Te Nijenhuis offers many telling examples of iconic process, e.g. *Sacred Songs*, 1:220: “The empty fifth *sa-pa* at the beginning of this phrase may refer to the bodilessness of the goddess, who becomes pure, vital energy” [with reference to the Kāmbhoji composition in the Kamalāmbā set].

33 Particularly prevalent in the musical-cum-verbal structures of the *caraṇam* verses.





*Māyūranātha-svāmi Temple, Mayilāṭuturai: Gopuram Tower*

when the temple *meḷams* were still attuned to the old ritual order, aimed at the late-afternoon hours (*sāyaraccāi*, from 5:00 PM): *Sadāśraye* in Saṇmukhapriya/Camaram; *Āryām abhayāmbām* in Bhairavi; *Girijayā* in Śaṅkarābharaṇam; *Abhayāmbā Jagadambā* in Kalyāṇi; *Dākṣāyaṇi* in Toḍi; and *Abhayāmbikāyai* in Yadukula-kāmbhoji.<sup>34</sup> Three more, *Abhayāmbikāyāḥ* and *Abhayāmbā-nāyaka vara-dāyaka* in Kedāra-gauḷa and *Abhayāmba-nāyaka* in Ānandabhairavi, the latter two directed to the consort of the goddess, are late-evening-to-night *rāgas* (*iraṇḍakālam*, from 7:00 PM on)—completing her daily temporal trajectory as the light fades. Of course, this goddess is not limited to this time slot: two of the compositions, *Ambikāyā[h]* in Kedāram<sup>35</sup> and *Māyūra-nātham* in Dhanyāsi, are meant for morning, and one more—*Śrī abhayāmbā*, the meditative, trilingual song in Śrīrāgam commonly seen today as framing the entire series—is to be sung at high noon. (This leaves out *Sahānā*, a relative newcomer to the Carnatic tradition and apparently not included in the Tiruvārūr *pēriyameḷam* ordering of the ragas.<sup>36</sup>) What is more, the whole series of 9 + 1 [+ the three addressed to Māyūra-nātha] was, we know, intended for performance during Navarātri in the autumn, one song per day.

Navarātri is synchronized with the great Aippaci festival in which vast numbers of pilgrims come to bathe in the Kāveri at this site, when the god danced the *Gaurī-tāṇḍava* (on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Aippaci, two days before he marries Abhayāmbā here), unique to Māyavaram.<sup>37</sup> During these days the goddess moves through the four main streets of the town and reaches the bank of the Kāveri in the form of a peahen before she re-enters the temple and achieves oneness with her husband.<sup>38</sup> As a peahen she no doubt speaks or sings the peacock-peahen note, the foundational *sa* (= C).<sup>39</sup> But she is also identified, as we have seen, with the luxuriant flow of the river—indeed, of the three-fold river constituted by the mixing of Kāveri, Gangā, and Yāmunā at the festival moment—on whose bank she resides in the form of a stone peahen worshiping the *liṅga* in preparation for her own reunion, or flowing together, with Māyūra-nātha.

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34 See Yoshitaka Terada, “Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: *Periya Mēḷam* and its Performance Practice.” *Asian Music* 39 (2008): 108–51.

35 This composition includes the detailed description of Kuṇḍalini-Yoga—perhaps a morning practice?

36 See Te Nijenhuis and Gupta, *Sacred Songs*, 1:233.

37 Does the *Gaurī-tāṇḍava* exemplify the male-female blending of Anavidyā?

38 Ambikapati 2008:57. See *Tulākāveripurāṇam* (Trichinopoly: Ripon Press, 1889).

39 D. Shulman, “The Buzz of God and Click of Delight,” in *Aesthetics in Performance: Formations of Symbolic Construction and Experience*, edited by Angela Hobart and Bruce Kapferer (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 49, following Śārṅgadeva; *Raghuvamśa* 1.39 (*ṣaḍ-saṃvādinīḥ kekā[h]*).

Are there elements of this rich characterization that come through in the Dīkṣitar *kṛtis* on this goddess? In what form do we meet her as the set unfolds? Or, stated differently: how has the composer grammaticalized this goddess in the forms in which he sees and hears her in his mind? Please recall that, on the most overt level, the entire Abhayāmbā set is organized as a grammatical progression through the eight Sanskrit declensions, each one expressed by a different rāga and a distinctive verbal text. But this evident and familiar principle of arrangement is only the beginning.

We can only proceed inductively, listening carefully to the way the music and the verbal texts reinforce one another and paying particular attention to characteristic phrasing, repetition, and evident emphasis. With apologies to my musicological colleagues into whose domain I am intruding, I will attempt a partial reading of two of the *kṛtis* that, I argue, evoke the sensibility we are exploring and reveal with some clarity the composer's technique, at least insofar as it can be related to the pragmatics of this still experimental art form. Readers are referred to the brilliant performances by Roopa Mahadevan at: <http://roopamahadevan.com>.<sup>40</sup> We begin with *Āryām abhayāmbām*, the accusative-case composition, in the extremely popular rāga Bhairavi, a derivative of the generative super-rāga Nāṭa-bhairavi (Melakarta 20). The composition is set in the rhythmically demanding *Aṭa tālam* with its fourteen beats—perhaps a deliberate enactment of the complex Peacock Dance.

Bhairavi has the following ascending and descending “scales”, respectively:

S R2 G1 M1 P Dh2 N1-2 S

S N2 Dh1 P M1 G1 R2 S

(However, the *mūrccana* variant of the ascending scale includes the melodic pattern

S G1 R2 G1 M1 P )<sup>41</sup>

Note the crucial alternation in the **dha** note in ascent and descent. We hear this

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40 There is also a CD recording of the entire Abhayāmbā set by E. Gayatri (Kolkata: Saregama India, 2008).

41 Walter Kaufmann, *The Rāgas of South India: A Catalogue of Scalar Material*. Calcutta, Bombay, New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., 1976, 206-207.

feature clearly in the recording. It is also important to attend to the pivotal role of **ni**, one of the *jīva-svaras* or a “life-giving note” in this rāga, usually sung with strong vibrato. Our composition begins on **ni** in the descending phrase, striking because of its eerie, even dissonant transition: **ni dha pa**, immediately followed by the rest of the descending scale: **ma pa ni-dha pa ma ga ri sa**. If you listen well, you will hear the **ni dha pa** sequence, a characteristic melodic phrase in Bhairavi,<sup>42</sup> repeated many times, to specific effect. I will attempt to spell out a few of these moments.

The “eerie” opening, in which the goddess begins her emergence, is typical of Dīkṣitar, a personal signature, undoubtedly keyed in this case to the nature and temperament of the goddess who is being summoned. It is her name that fills this tonal sequence:

*āryām abhayāmbām bhaja re citta santatam*<sup>43</sup>

Noble No-Fear: always go to her, oh my mind

We are still in the opening pallavi refrain. The second and third lines go:

*avidyā-kārya-kalanām tyaja re*

*ādi-madhyaṅta-rahitām śiva-sahitām*

Give up, oh my mind, doing deeds out of non-awareness.

[Go to her who is] devoid of beginning, middle, and end,  
who is connected to Śiva.

Now one should listen to the refrain as a whole. You may have noticed that the opening melodic sequence repeats itself at the beginning of the second line (*avidyā[kārya-kalanām]*, “non-awareness deeds”), as if there were some intimate link between No Fear and the non-awareness the mind is told to renounce. “Mind” is too dull a word for *citta*, which generally means, by this period, something like “thinking,” or “intellection”—a relatively limited part of awareness. More to the point, can we fail to hear a reference to Non-Non-Awareness, the alter ego of our goddess, standing beside her and somehow mixing male and female personae? The musical repetition establishes a surprising relation. The two verbal phrases—*Anavidyā*, the name of the *līṅga* linked to the goddess, and *avidyā-kārya-kalanām tyaja*, “give up doing deeds out of non-awareness”—are,

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42 Te Nijenhuis and Gupta, *Sacred Songs*, 1:223.

43 Texts of the *kṛtis* can be found in *Vāggeyakāraratna śrī muttusvāmi dīkṣita kṛti-maṇi-dīpika*, edited Niraghatam Sriramakṛṣṇa Sastri (Tenali: Vani Art Printers, n.d.), 198-217.

in fact, basically synonymous.<sup>44</sup> The dissonant *vivādi* note (**dha**), always worth paying attention to in Dīkṣitar songs, animates both phrases.

But what about the second half of the first line, with its crucial verb, *bhaja* (“go to”)? The singer is at the bottom of the scale, and the address to the “mind”, starting with the vocative particle **re** but then rising and falling to the long *citta*, is structured by the stressed, repeated **sa**—the peacock note. One can always say, of course, that in Carnatic music the phrase, sooner or later, rests, at least momentarily, on this **sa**. I think, nonetheless, that throughout our set of *kṛtis* the **sa** has a much more lively function—as if it were the voice of the goddess singing or speaking. She says: “Listen to me, you recalcitrant, thought-clogged mind. Let go of that non-knowing. Listen.”

So within a few notes, the composer has drawn in the initial contours of this deity, evoked the tonality that animates her awareness, suggested her somewhat wider persona, and allowed her to speak directly through him, gently commanding him, or us, to act, literally to change our minds. Since the melodic characterization is so powerful here, one might want to juxtapose it with a far less conspicuous use of this same progression, for example in Dīkṣitar's well-known composition on the earth-liṅga, *Cintaya mā-kanda-mūla*, in this same rāga.

Let's move on to the anupallavi, the secondary refrain, whose text reads:

*sūryāgni-candra-maṇḍala-madhya-vāsinīm*  
*sukhatara-pravarttinīm svetara-nivāsinīm*  
*ācārya-śiṣyānugraha-karaṇa-śakti-pradâpāra-karuṇām*

[To her, No-Fear] who dwells in the middle of the circle of Sun, Fire, and Moon—who acts in happiness, who lives in herself and in others, whose infinite compassion generates the power of the mutual blessings of teacher and student

The word “middle”, *madhya*, comes to rest on the **ma**—literally, middle—note. By now we can formulate a simple grammatical rule for this music: iconic correspondences tend to dominate the relation of the musical to the verbal text, as I have suggested in the preliminary discussion above in the wake of te Nijenhuis and other scholars. Now listen again to the important phrase—probably the first fully subjective statement by the author in this composition—*svetara-nivāsinīm*, “who lives in herself and in others.”

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44 Compare the phrase *kalpita-māyā-kāryaṃ tyaja...* in the Kalyāṇi composition from the Kamalāmbā series.

One can disentangle from the wider context an expansive variation on the opening pattern:

[pa pa] **dha ni ni ni sa dha** ni sa ni sa ni sa sa

The goddess inhabits her own self, also the singer's self, the internal and external domains clearly merging in his understanding of her nature—and again, she comes to rest on the note of the peacock's cry. This one small phrase, both verbal and musical, offers us something of the composer's self-perception, colored as it is by his visualization, or rather auralization, of the goddess. She is, in his awareness, a deep persona who is moving him to sing, moving through him, perhaps revolving inwardly, and with pronounced dissonance and struggle, as she moves.

I don't want to belabor the point. It should be enough, for now, to say that the “signature” of this goddess, who is becoming more clearly visible to the mind's ear by the moment, turns up, with some interesting variation, at least seven times in the *caranāṃ* verse that follows. Incidentally, this stanza is composed in the strongly hypotactic Sanskrit that Indira Peterson has shown to be intrinsic to the Dīkṣitar style,<sup>45</sup> so that, as the song progresses, the intertwining of the two active personae becomes audible in the syntax of the text. The verse is also marked by the so-called “Dravidian” *dvitīyākṣarānuprāsa*, that is head-rhyming of the second syllable of each line (*nandana-vandana-candana-vandana-manda...*). Here is a translation of this long stanza:

[To her] who wears a garland of flowers grown in heaven,  
who is the goddess, Bhairavī, of dancing Śiva/Hara,  
more than capable of freely giving a place in the same world as his  
to those human beings who follow the discipline that clears their mind,  
who serve other servants in building temples for her, in coating her  
with sandal paste, in cleaning her home, who sing and recite her hymns  
of praise. Her face, bright as a lotus, is graced by a gentle smile.  
She's the goddess of Guru-guha, the sister of Viṣṇu, the great  
Tripura-sundarī, Most Beautiful in the World, which she floods  
with joyfulness.

Dīkṣitar has, as always, signed his name, Guru-guha, and also found a way to

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45 Indira Peterson, “Sanskrit in Carnatic Music: The Songs of Muttusvāmi Dīkṣita,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 29 (1986), 183-99.



mention the rāga's name, [Naṭa-]bhairavī, this name being perfectly integrated into the syntax of the long sentence. I won't attempt to mark all the sites of the melodic pattern that we have isolated, but I should mention that it appears both in her proper name—Mahā-tripura-sundarī—and in the very last segment of the text, resuming the opening sequence verbatim: *ānanda-laharīm*, the “flood of joyfulness,” a certain reference to the well-known Śrī-vidyā text of that name. But when the singer returns to the pallavi refrain and brings the entire composition to conclusion, she ends not on the lower *sa*, the familiar resting point, the peacock note, but on the unbalanced, unnerving, and again “eerie” *ri*.

Having come this far, we should observe how this composition begins with a dramatic musical descent. We might notice how many of the *vibhakti-krtis* are downward-looking and how many move upwards in this musical version of the well-known visual manifestation of Tripura-sundarī in the Śrīcakra. It is, I think, very clear that the composer is building up the goddess triangle by triangle, piece after piece, in the well-structured and densely populated cosmos that is her world, her self, and her ongoing process of self-unfolding.



*Māyūranātha-svāmi Temple: Abhayāmbā as a peahen worships Māyūranātha*

There are discoveries to be made at every point in the performance. There is also considerable room for the performer to expand the terms of his musical text (we have, however, a complete musical notation of this *kṛti* in Subbaraya Dīkṣitar's magnum opus—the only such notation of any of the Abhayāmbā *kṛtis* from that time). Iconicity by no means exhausts the expressive devices available to the singer. The wider principle is that of grammaticalization, in both its visual and aural forms, and in inseparable connectedness to the verbal Sanskrit text. Before offering a list of rules for this grammar, I would like to examine briefly one more of the compositions—the very moving one set in Kalyāṇi, *Abhayāmbā jagad-ambā*. Once again, we proceed in an inductive mode.

#### THE NEW SENSIBILITY (2) ABHAYĀMBĀ JAGAD-AMBĀ

If we take the Cāmaram/Ṣaṇmukhapriya composition, *Sadāśraye*, as the “frame” or *dhyāna-kṛti* (rather than the Śrīrāgam one more often said to be occupying this slot),<sup>46</sup> then the Kalyāṇi song, *Abhayāmbā jagad-ambā* (*ādi-tālam*), is the true opening of the entire set (thus naturally couched in the nominative case). As such, it is graced by an auspicious, happy tone; to be understood more deeply, it should be juxtaposed with the Kalyāṇi composition from the Kamalāmbā series. Unlike the latter, “our” *kṛti* mostly lacks the characteristic phrase *ga-ma#-pa*; in fact, the *tivra ma*, perhaps the most conspicuous feature of this rāga, is entirely absent from the pallavi refrain and mostly skipped from the melodic progressions in the later sections of the song as well. Or, to be more precise: this sharp *ma* appears as the dissonant *vivādi*, so that each time it appears it draws attention to itself. Remember that such striking, somewhat dissonant combinations are classic Dīkṣitar, a personal signature. Only a faint trace of something along these lines, a shadowy, jarring *dha*, manages to slip into the melodic ascent in the second line of the pallavi:

*abhayāmbā jagad-ambā rakṣatu*  
*ātma-rūpa-pratibimbā mad-ambā*

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46 The Śrīrāgam *kṛti* stands out as quite different from the rest; as noted, its verbal text is couched in three languages, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu. A particular prestige attaches to Śrīrāgam, which is said to have been born from the Sadyovaktra face of Śiva: see *Sanḡita-sārāmṛta* of Tulaja, edited by Subrahmanya Sastri (Madras: Music Academy, 1942), 9 (p. 71). Possibly for this reason, the Śrīrāgam composition has been seen as introducing the entire series, as it does the Kamalāmbā set.



May No-Fear, Mother of the world, protect (me),  
the counter-image of the inner self, my goddess/mother

As usual in Kalyāṇi, the third note, **ga**, predominates from the start. But you can hear that faintly jarring **dha** in the third syllable of *pratibimba*, “counter-image,” “reflection,” and in the vibrato that follows. This is only fitting: the mirror image of the inner self is not entirely congruent with the inner self, to put the matter as gently as possible.

Now listen to the anupallavi:

*ibha-vadana-śrī-guruguha-jananī īśa-māyūra-nātha-rañjanī*  
*abhaya-varada-pāṇī ali-veṇī āśrita-mā-vāṇī kalyāṇī*  
Mother of the elephant-headed god and of Guruguha-Skanda [and of me]  
pleasing to God, her lord, Māyūra-nātha,  
her hand held in the No-Fear posture and offering boons,  
with bees buzzing in her long hair,  
Lakṣmī and Speech at her side,  
[ever] auspicious.<sup>47</sup>

Note the second-syllable head-rhyme; the composer's signature, coinciding with the name of the god, Lord Skanda, teacher of secrets; and the rāga's name at the end. But even more important than these formal elements are the three instances of the sharp *ma* emphasizing the nasal **ma/na's** of the verbal text: *ja-Na-nī*, “mother,” and then *īśa-Māyūra-nātha-[rañjanī]*, “pleasing to God, her lord,” and later [*āśrita-*] *Mā-vāṇī*, “Lakṣmī and Speech at her side.” Musicologists call this *svarākṣara*, a peculiarly literal form of iconicity—the name of the note superimposed on its homonymous verbal text. The note **ma**, that is, is the goddess as mother and as Lakṣmī, and also as the opening of the name of the Māyavaram god. Interestingly, all of these instances create a tensile gap in the otherwise harmonic progressions: if we take the god's name, for example, we have the phrase (upper)*rī-sa* < *tivra ma*, a huge downward glide resting, for a moment, on this diagnostic tone.

The same emphatic dissonance recurs at several points in the *caraṇam* (including another *svarākṣara*, *bhasa-mā-na*). Perhaps by now we can recognize a pivotal imbalance in certain aspects of No-Fear, possibly including her somewhat unstable fusion with the male part of her being, Māyūranātha, the Peacock

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47 “Ever auspicious,” Kalyāṇī—see Bhāskara-rāya's gloss on this name in the *Lalita-sahasranāma*.

Dancer. Together with the Bhairavi rāga with which we began, this Kalyāṇi composition seeks to explore precisely these esoteric elements of the goddess it is materializing before us.<sup>48</sup> The sharp **ma** does not subsume her—the *kṛti* as a whole is true to its name, auspicious, serene. But neither does the composer let us forget that this very auspiciousness contains within it a certain energizing discord, or an open space, a long stretch in which the goddess perhaps turns or revolves—a reflexive moment. In this sense, the Abhayāmbā Kalyāṇi paints a portrait distinct from that of Dīkṣitar's "home" goddess, Kamalāmbā. And just as the upper-*ri-to-ma* space suddenly opens in Abhayāmbā, whatever this means, so it must open up in the singer of, and in the listener to, her song.<sup>49</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: A GRAMMAR OF ART MUSIC

What are we to make of this kind of musical experience? How are we to understand its expressive drive, its material building blocks, its fusion of verbal and melodic texts, its predominant generic forms as they present themselves to us, in a fresh way, in the late eighteenth-century? And how did the tradition evolve from its original cultic and ritual contexts to the art music that we now hear on the concert stage? Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar, I want to say again, is probably the key creative figure in this transition. Let me try to state my argument, based on what we have heard so far, in a straightforward, somewhat abstract manner, as a series of interconnected points.

1. *Pragmatics*. There is a logic to the compositions, seen both as individual units and as comprising a cumulative set. Dīkṣitar clearly had a fondness for such sets, some of which I have mentioned; in all such cases, including the Abhayāmbā series, we would do well to think of them as integrated wholes, like the Haydn quartets that come as a series of six and deserve to be heard as such. A strong integration, possibly the single most salient feature of these sets, exists on several interlocking levels—musically, of course, but also in terms of the conceptual or metaphysical underpinnings of the series and the particularity of its divine subject. It is not enough simply to speak

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48 In the very popular Hindustani rag Yaman, the counterpart of Carnatic Kalyāṇi, the space opening up between **ri** and **pa**, with the sharp **ma** serving as fulcrum, is said to stretch to the end of the cosmos if the singer carefully articulates each note: see Shulman, "The Buzz of God," 55, citing Mohineddin Dagar. (Incidentally, **ma** is also associated with the *krauñca* bird, thus with the origin of poetry.)

49 My thanks to my wife Eileen.

of a Tantric orientation and to tease out resonances with the classical Śrī-vidyā in its eighteenth-century Kāveri-delta extension, including a general characterization of the goddess as Tripura-sundarī, her physiological link to the *caḥras* and the Kuṇḍalinī coiled at the base of the spine (see the Kedāram *kṛti* in our set), and so on. We have excellent studies by Harold Powers and by Samjukta Gupta showing the correspondences of the verbal texts in the *kṛtis* (especially the Kamalāmbā series) with canonical sources. But we need to take the next step.

As I have said, at least in all the major goddess-oriented sets of *kṛtis*, the composer is clearly building the deity, note by note, in the manner of an aural, audible yantra, akin to the graphic and visible Śrīcakra, thus enacting a gradual progression through the nine enclosures (*āvaraṇa*) in the direction of the dense center. Dikṣitar is a Tantric, not a *bhakti* poet in the Tyāgarāja mode (note again the bifurcation of the Carnatic tradition in these two concurrent streams). None of the *kṛtis* are descriptive, in the usual sense of the word; I am not even sure they could be called discursive. They are non-symbolic, pragmatic, operative moves in the active construction of a goddess, as, indeed, the Dikṣitar verbal texts tell us at many points as the verses move through the enclosures, awaken the Kuṇḍalinī, call up the Mālinī mantra,<sup>50</sup> enter into the space of the deepest mantric tension (the *hrīṃkāra*),<sup>51</sup> and produce the personal experience (*anubhava*) of sharing the aliveness, the spatial proximity, and the actual physical form of this deity, with the taste of freedom that these existential states engender (*sālokya-sāmīpya-sārūpya-mukti*).<sup>52</sup> Such sharing of existential states may also be seen as the latent goal of the performance. Hence the common imperatives, conjuring her response, imparting direction to the process and accelerating its progression: Come to us (*ehi*), come close (*saṃnidhehi*), give us goodness (*bhadrām dehi*).<sup>53</sup>

2. *Subjectivity*. But who is this person at the center? In all cases, she—Abhayāmbā, Kamalāmbā, Nilotpalāmbā, Maṅgalāmbā, and so on—is highly specific in nature, attributes, and awareness, the very opposite of a generalized Tantric principle. Abhayāmbā has her own, distinctive modes of being and of manifesting, and the unique elements that compose her inner character achieve musical expression in the *kṛtis* that bring her to emergence. In

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50 See the Kedāra-gaulā *kṛti* of Abhayāmbā and Punnāgavarāḷi of Kamalāmbā.

51 See text of the Sahānā and Śrī-rāgam *kṛtis* of Kamalāmbā.

52 See Kedāra-gaulā *kṛti* of Abhayāmbā.

53 Cāmaram of Abhayāmbā.

other words, the grammar and syntax of these songs are intrinsic to her particular range of potential states. Abhayāmbā is endowed with an individual subjectivity, realized in music or, better, grammaticalized and also profoundly interwoven with the composer's subjective, personal, individual sensibility. Let us remember that the composer is in the process of turning himself into her, or her into himself, as he sings (similarly with the performer who serves as a co-creator of the compositions he or she sings). We are witnessing the early stages of a revolution in sensibility and taste. A pragmatics of tangible manifestation have fused with the individualistic and personal creativity of a singular artist, who signs his compositions at least twice—he is Guruguha, as he always tells us, but his true signature lies in the recognizable, indeed inimitable, style, tonality, figuration, and structure of his works.

3. *The Internal and External Sacrifice (antar-yāga-bahir-yāgamulu)*. This pregnant phrase, as we have seen, comes directly out of the Dīkṣitar family tradition, only two generations away from the composer himself. What did Subbarāya-dīkṣitulu mean by it? The external ritual is clear enough: the Śrī-vidyā offers a prescribed course of ritualized practices and offerings, correlated, of course, to internal, intentional states. Bhāskara-rāya—he is not alone—tells us in his commentary on the *Bhāvanā Upaniṣad* that the internal sacrifice is the sum of ongoing meditative-imaginative praxis, a critical aspect to the entire enterprise of transforming self into goddess.<sup>54</sup> The practitioner builds up the goddess in his or her mind in the ordered patterns mapped out by the yantras and mantras of this Tantric system. The progression is highly disciplined, and the goal, and the stages on the way to it, well defined. We know the texts that were used to guide the adept and to explain the meaning of each step. Eighteenth-century Tañjāvūr produced some of the most lucid handbooks we have to the Śrī-vidyā in practice.

Also in performance. It is important to keep in mind that the goddess—Tripura-sundarī or her local manifestation, such as Abhayāmbā—is made of sound, as is the universe in which she is embedded and which she has generated from within herself. One striking aspect of the Dīkṣitar corpus as a whole is the way the composer has superimposed two separate notions of phonic evolution from very subtle, in fact inaudible states to something we can hear and know. The Śrī-vidyā, like earlier Śaiva systems, shows us a phonematic progression from micro-sonar, pre-semantic quivers and buzzes to discursive speech, with its concomitant and enduring tensions. I have suggested that this sequence is

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54 See D. Shulman, *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 301.

intimated in some of what we hear in the Māyavaram compositions. On the other hand, the emergence of audible sound from a domain of latency or potentiality is a standard, and ancient, theme in the musical handbooks and a subject of some importance to what one listens to at a concert.<sup>55</sup> In its later phases, this process of emergence includes the movement from *śruti*, the stuff of phonic experience, to *svara*—the organized, meaningfully structured notes of a rāga. Distinct in origin, these two portraits of the prehistory of sound have merged, quite explicitly, in the verbal texts of the *kṛtis*.<sup>56</sup> Put differently, the mantric efficacy of the primordial syllables has charged the musical syntax of the composer's texts. I have already spoken of the pragmatic charge that molds this music to its purpose.

It is commonplace to speak of visualization as a dominant form of worshipping the Tantric deity and undergoing the standard ritual and meditative progression. Moreover, sound, in this period in south India, is something one should, indeed must, be able to see.<sup>57</sup> Co-extensive with this notion is the practice I have called auralization—an approximation, perhaps, of the “inner sacrifice,” or rather, the translation of the latter into pragmatic performance. By ordering and combining the sound-syllables, the composer—also the performer and the listener—can compose the deity, not in the external space of the temple but in his or her mind. Think of our set of *kṛtis* as examples of, or experiments with, active auralization guided by the composer, activated by the singer, and shared by the listener. It is just here that Dīkṣitar's historic move took place. He has shifted musical operations from the mantric world of ritualized practice into an internal, mantic domain of effective auralization (with verbal and visual components, as in all forms of Tantric auralization). The goddess still has to be created and worked upon, but all of this now takes place in the mind. In the process, the indirectly referential, overdetermined, and encoded grammar of the mantras<sup>58</sup> has been superseded and replaced by the new, iconic and figurative grammar of the *kṛti*. I will try to formulate how this grammar works in a moment.

We could call this shift “internalization”—an old Indological word, perhaps by now not very useful or even meaningful. I prefer to speak about grammaticalization. Yet Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar himself often points to the “internal ritual,”

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55 Shulman, “Buzz of God.” See *Śaṅgīta-sārāṁṛta* 1, pp. 4-5, following the *Śaṅgīta-ratnākara*.

56 For example, in the Kedāra-gauḷa composition in our series, and the Sahānā composition in the Kamalāmbā set.

57 Shulman, “How to Bring a Goddess into Being.”

58 *Ibid.*

sometimes, it seems, as a way of characterizing the musical experience he has invented and regularized. It is possible for us to say something about the dynamics of this experience and about how it is generated. You need a series of attuned, awake imaginations. Auralization normally occurs in tripartite forms, as I have just said: composer, performer, and listener enter into the process together, weaving their imaginations, and that of the goddess they are addressing, into a somewhat volatile whole. Sound marks the external surface of this whole, and has its own, far from random patterns and logic. One can see something similar, in some ways, in the way the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theater of Kerala works to braid together the imaginative potential of actors and spectators, thereby creating and shaping a new, shared space.<sup>59</sup> Note that “internalization” of the sort I am discussing emerges directly from (indeed presupposes) the merging of courtly and temple settings in Nāyaka- and Maratha-period Tañjāvūr; both earlier contexts have fed harmoniously into the mental arena that has superseded them as the venue for a new musical praxis.

It is this auralizing, displaced ritual of listening that we seem to have forgotten, though it was once—two centuries ago—a natural, indeed irresistible extension of poetic and musical performance in the far South. The early audiences, which I have called “proto-secular,” surely knew it. What could a word like “secular” actually mean here? For one thing, auralization has been transferred to the salon or, later, the concert hall, at a far remove from the earlier institutional settings of Carnatic music. For another, such musical praxis requires a specific kind of attentiveness (a mental move very close to imagination):<sup>60</sup> one listens with an awareness that is partly, perhaps increasingly, unfocused, though highly receptive to the isomorphism of the musical structures and the images generated in the mind. It is not just a matter of admiring the artistry of the composer, and of the singer; nor is the attentive listener involved in acts of decoding. A strong iconicity of verbal and musical texts shapes one's listening and tends to surprise. Such forms of attentiveness are not associated with strain; the cognitive effects may never crystallize as formal perceptions, amenable to articulation; nonetheless, very dramatic things are going on in the listener's mind.

Auralization, iconicity, figuration: these are big words, and inevitably abstract. Perhaps it would be better to think in terms of sculpting in sound. Dīkṣitar was a master sculptor; but he did not work alone. He was closely linked to

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59 See Tammy Klein, “Kshedimyon vesiman nifgashim: huladta shel hapoetika hahadasha shel teatron hakudiyattam.” M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, 2009.

60 See Shulman, *More than Real*, 134-43.

the artistic heritage of the mid-eighteenth century, including the works of his father; he was clearly aware of what his contemporaries were doing. His audiences, in places like Maṇali and Ēṭṭayapuram, had their own part to play. But Dīkṣitar may have been the first to produce a fully three-dimensional music, complete in the package he offers us as a program for experiments in listening and as a way to find, and “realize,” the goddess in the mind. Note how far we have come from the courtly *padam* and *varṇam* of the two or three generations before Dīkṣitar. There is, for one thing, an evident difference in scale, complexity, and intensity. More important, what I have called “auralization” is far more limited in scope in the earlier genres. Three-dimensional effects in the *padam* and *varṇam* mostly depend on their being performed as dance. It is thus of interest that a few Dīkṣitar compositions entered the devadāsī repertoire, as Soneji has shown us (one of Dīkṣitar's direct disciples was the Tiruvārūr temple dance, Kamalam)<sup>61</sup>—but only a few. The new music was, in its own distinctive way, well suited to the emerging middle-class audience of connoisseurs who frequented the salons where devadāsīs performed.<sup>62</sup> But Dīkṣitar *kṛtis* are not usually danced. They have a self-contained complexity that demands the full attention of a receptive listener—and, of course, a gifted performer.

Interestingly, the other major vector of innovation in Carnatic music at this period—the one we associate, above all, with Tyāgarāja—turns out, somewhat paradoxically, to be closer to the courtly model of the *padam-varṇam* (paradoxically, because Tyāgarāja famously disdained all contact with the royal court). Classic devotional texts generate far more direct, but also less complicated, forms of auralization. The Dīkṣitar three-dimensionality—the sculptural quality—is of an entirely different order. To understand this more deeply, let us attempt to formulate the working grammar that rules the Dīkṣitar corpus.

4. *Grammaticalization*. How did he do it? There are several ways to describe the means he used, some of them familiar from earlier studies, perhaps not all of them fully premeditated. I would argue for a mode of reflective grammaticalization, in the sense that the logic of composition is ruled by operative principles that, taken together, comprise an innovative grammar (actually both a first-order and a second-order grammar, as we shall see).

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61 Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 247; Subbarāma Dīkṣitulu, *Sanḡita sampradāya pradarśini*, 1:28.

62 The history of transmission and teaching offers further evidence for this argument: it was Dīkṣitar who largely molded the sensibility of the famous Tañjāvūr Quartet, among other important nineteenth-century composers and performers working in the new public spaces. See Soneji, *loc. cit.*

The term itself is implied by the conventional designation of the large sets as *vibhakti-kṛtis*: the composer, along with the performer and the listener, declines (also conjugates) the deity with the help of these principles. We saw that Dīkṣitar uses a nearly synonymous term, *nāda-laya-gati*, to characterize the goddess: she is “processed through [subtle] sound and rhythm.” She is, Dīkṣitar tells us in the Śaṅkarābharaṇam composition (*Girijayā ajayā*), *ādi-kṣānta-varṇa-veditā*, “revealed in the phonematic series from *a* to *kṣ*,” that is, in the cosmogonic unfolding of syllables from the subtlest, pre-audible level to that of actual speech or song, as Abhinavagupta defined it in the first book of his *Tantrāloka*. It is perhaps worth noting, given the characteristic dissonance built into so many of the Dīkṣitar *kṛtis*, that this process of unfolding is an uneven, unsteady movement in which a vector straining toward creation (objectification, externalization) is in continuous tension with a powerful vector of resistance and re-absorption by the original buzz, or by silence. Very likely, it is this rhythm, the movement toward and away from audibility, that we are hearing in the Abhayāmbā songs.

Four meta-principles rule the new grammar.

- a. **Radical iconicity** informs the conjoined, overlapping verbal and musical texts, as others have noted before.<sup>63</sup> One need not exaggerate the scope of this phenomenon, but neither should it be underestimated; we have seen, or rather heard, a few, relatively minor and simple examples. Iconic correspondence conduces to musical characterization of the goddess in her individual nature, as we have seen, and to strong thematic statements about her nature and biography. The set of *kṛtis* thus slowly leads to a state in which this goddess is, for the duration of the concert, ever more present as herself, with her audible and visible yantras and, in all likelihood, with internalized yantras becoming manifest in the singer's mind as in the listener's as well. As I have argued, Abhayāmbā is a late-afternoon or twilight goddess, intimately connected to the ambiguous Anavidyā *liṅga* and to a set of further attributes, temporally accessible in the course of the Navarātri week and a half, and so on, all of this being enacted, rather than described, in the music. Syllable by syllable, *svara* by *svara*, she is being “made,” or made manifest, in the rule-bound, patterned, and teleological discipline of musical grammar.

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63 See above; the remarkable lectures by Lalgudi G. J. R. Krishnan, *Pada Var-nams* [DVD](Chennai: Kalakendra.com, 2009); te Nijenhuis, *Sacred Songs*, 1:195, on (*svarākṣara*), with numerous examples in her study.



Iconicity operates in several distinct ways in this grammar. We have, first, a technical kind, very evident in the *svarâksaras*, where the verbal text coincides, partly or entirely, with the names of the *sargam* notes, as we have seen. Then there is the expressive use of a relevant *svara* in particular contexts—in the case we examined, the “peacock note.”<sup>64</sup> But by far the more extensive and resonant forms of iconic relations could be called “thematic,” when the musical text becomes, for a moment, isomorphic with the verbal semantics (also, in the present case, with elements of the yantra diagram that is this goddess).<sup>65</sup> Thematic iconicity tends to be systemic and complex, penetrating and animating seemingly distinct textual levels. There are many cases when it reaches toward the efficacy of the mantra, in effect self-consciously reconstituting the mantra in another idiom: for example, we have the famous *kṛti* on Sūrya, *Sūrya-mūrte*, where the very name of the rāga, Saurāṣṭra/Saurāṣṭa, itself embodies the primary [Saura-] aṣṭārṇa mantra applied to the Sun God.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the Sadāśraye *kṛti* in our set seems to reconstitute the well-known *kâdi-vidyâ* or *kâdi-mantra* (Abhayāmbā is *śārira-kâdi-vidyâ-siddhânta-yuktâ*, “joined to the embodied *kâdi* knowledge in its conclusive [that is, effective] form”)—as if by singing the composition one could achieve the results that were once attainable only through the mantra.<sup>67</sup> This mechanism of formal substitution and/or extension is, I think, paradigmatic for the dynamics of the “internal sacrifice.”

Truly astonishing levels of iconic correspondence appear in *kṛtis* such as Dikṣitar's *rāga-mālikā Śrī Viśvanātham*, comprising fourteen rāgas that are correlated to the fourteen worlds of the Purāṇic-Tantric cosmos; these worlds unfold in a forward (*pravṛtti*) direction initially as the rāgas appear in sequence and then revert to their original latent state (*nivṛtti*) as the rāgas are “played” backwards, “in a retrograde scheme.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, musical sound-sequence is

64 Similarly, we have the pregnant “elephant-call” *ni* in Dikṣitar's penultimate composition, *Ehi annapūrṇe*.

65 Thus, as te Nijenhuis has shown, the Kāmbhoji raga is intrinsically linked to the fourth *āvaraṇa* of the Śrīyantra, and so on.

66 See S.S. Janaki, *Samskṛta and Saṅgita* (Chennai: Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, 2010), 192.

67 See Shulman, “How to Bring a Goddess into Being,” 335, with reference to Lakṣmī-dhara and Kaivalyāśrama on *Saundarya-laharī* 32-33. The *kâdi-vidyâ* is associated with sensual, this-worldly, embodied enjoyment, as Dikṣitar's phrase also suggests. Note, in the *kṛti*, the *dvitīyākṣarānuprāsa* and the strategic placement of the reference to the *kâdi-vidyâ* in line 4 of the *caraṇam*, immediately following mention of the subtle *nāda-bindu* that comprises the life-force of this goddess.

68 Janaki, *Samskṛta and Saṅgita*, 160-61.

organized to reproduce the rhythm of cosmic creation and re-absorption, and the verbal text of this composition explicitly tells us that this process unfolds in both the god, Viśvanātha at Kuḷikkarai, and in the music (*caturdaśa-bhuvana-rūpa-rāga-mālikābharaṇa-dharaṇāntaḥkaraṇam*). Not all listeners will be able to hear and recognize these complex and subtle moves—but not all listeners have to. The music works its magic (I take the word literally) even if you don't “think” it.

- b. ***Alaṅkāra***—figuration, in a wide sense—is a grammatical device serving to “thicken” the goddess and to render her accessible. It takes many forms, some of which I have mentioned earlier (figures of syntax, figures of sound, structural devices such as vertical resposion, rebus figures, and the richly exfoliated ecology of repetition). Figuration is almost never an extrinsic application to a pre-existing template; rather, it constitutes the template for auralizing performance and tends to be bound to its object in singular and specific ways that enable her concrete appearance in the mind. In general, as in poetry, figuration has a causal aspect: Abhayāmbā is made present *as configured*. Underlying musical configuration we find the ever-present reality, or necessity, of visible sound.<sup>69</sup>
- c. ***Disjunction, dissonance, trans-semanticity***. Side by side with radical iconic effects, we find potentially contrapuntal moves; since the musical and verbal texts and textures, however iconically interwoven, retain their own logic and internal autonomy, there are many neuralgic points when the two domains are at odds. A grammar of performance has to take cognizance of disjunction. Perhaps this is the moment to remark that Dīkṣitar's Sanskrit is, in one sense, a kind of Telugu and thus naturally reproduces the contrapuntal rhythms of Telugu prosody in recitation (syntactic units are normally at odds with prosodial ones). I have pointed to the expressive power of dissonance in our set of songs.

Such disjunctions are relatively simple examples of a much deeper principle of composition. Dīkṣitar's musical grammar includes a trans-semantic

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69 See the definition of *alaṅkāra* in the *Saṅgīta-sārāmṛta* 6, quoting earlier sources in a recontextualized, Tantric frame. Tulaja cites the *Nāṭya-śāstra* on the absolute necessity of figuration, that is, on the intrinsic relation of ornament and ornamented, the former constituting the latter.

component, as Harold Powers has stressed.<sup>70</sup> Stated different: like other poetic grammars in South India, this one includes a mechanism for transcending its own rules.<sup>71</sup> Let me repeat that the *kṛti* reflects, perhaps structures, the inherent tension between self-manifestation of a divine person and that person's tendency to slip back into inaccessible reaches of the self. This tension is built into all audible utterance and has been articulated from Bhartṛhari on, with particular forcefulness in the *Mālinī-tantra* and the mature Śrī-vidyā. The classical Dīkṣitar *kṛti* thus slips in and out of iconicity and its related semanticity. Or we could say that a further, unexpected type of iconicity embodies the tension between a knowable, auralized and visualized goddess-as-sound and the literally unthinkable (*unmanī*) level of her existence as an inaudible quiver. This tension, among other things, is something we are meant to hear in performance. We may, then, have to imagine a grammar without words or other signs and a syntax without sentences<sup>72</sup> carried along, in this case, by regularly emergent mental phonemes.

Partly because of this important feature of the corpus, we need to speak of a second-order grammar. First-order grammaticalization is immediately evident in the immense effort of the Tañjāvūr musicologists from the sixteenth century onwards; in their works we see the systematization of the *meḷam*, the cataloguing of distinctive, rāga-specific phrasing, the ramified discussions of *tāḷam*, and the attempt to map an ecology of musical genres. Second-order grammaticalization follows the reflective logic I have tried to outline. It deals in both iconic and meta-semantic effects, including “pure,” structural figuration (figures of form, prosodial *śabdāḷankāras*—some of them familiar from Sanskrit poetics), and in the transposition of mantra into the domain of auralized, internal performance. This new meta-grammar short-circuits the processes of precise decoding in which the classical mantra specializes, replacing them with alternative modes of efficacious sounds. But some of the mantric meta-rules still operate. For example: “Any effective phonic pattern can be visually mapped and quantified.”<sup>73</sup> “All non-random phonic sequences are consequential.” And so on. Note, though, that the domain of operation of such rules is now firmly located in the listener's mind.

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70 Powers, “Musical Art and Esoteric Theism,” 336.

71 See D. Shulman, *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

72 I owe this phrase to Yonatan Moss, who uses it to describe the linguistic situation in Paradise, before the Fall, in the view of Syriac exegetical sources.

73 Shulman, “How to Bring a Goddess into Being,” 338.

- d. **Idiolect.** At the heart of the entire process of grammaticalization lies the personal inflection, idiosyncratic and affective, of the composer and the further, still highly personal idiom of the performer. Each acknowledges his or her responsibility for what happens—unpredictably—in the course of performance. A space for experiment remains open. In this sense, the musical performance moves away from the scientific, objectivist causality of the mantra, with its over-determined rules of application. Possibly for this very reason, auralization of the goddess in concert performance gradually lost its original, still largely ritualized character, which was replaced by a new, less causally oriented art of listening. In this respect, the manifestation of the goddess may well take unique, idiosyncratic forms in each listener's mind.

Nowhere is the personal voice of the composer-singer more evident than in the omnipresent vocatives addressed to the deity he is conjuring up. Note that there is a cardinal difference between *describing* a goddess and *addressing* her by name, that is, activating her in relation both to singer and audience. Resonant vocatives, "recursive" insofar as they take up their familiar intertexts, appeal to the goddess, attract her attention, impact upon her internal states of awareness. Like other elements of this grammar, vocative address is primarily effectual and pragmatic, a basic technique of auralization, always highly specific in its articulation. Note that we have hardly begun to characterize the singular style, lexis, syntax, and prosody of Dīkṣitar's verbal texts.

A more technical series of first-order grammatical features would include the structuring of the *vibhakti* set, as we find with Abhayāmbā, in the *graha-bheda* form, in which each subsequent raga can be derived from the preceding one by starting from a different note of the scale<sup>74</sup>—another way to construct the goddess as a densely integrated and interconnected temple/yantra of sound. We would also want to say more about the dissonant *vivādi* notes in relation to the *jīva-svaras*, as in the case of the Bhairavi composition I referred to. I cannot pursue further the grammatical uses of rhythm in this essay; note, though, that the famous set of compositions on the planets is unified by the complete *sulādi* set of primary rhythms.<sup>75</sup>

A grammar of emergence requires fierce intertextual resonance, a dense interconnectivity—both within the set of the nine or ten *kṛtis* and between this set and each parallel one (Kamalāmbā<sup>76</sup> and Nilotpālāmbā in particular, but also the

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74 See Te Nijenhuis, *Sacred Songs*, 1:194.

75 See discussion *ibid.* 1:133; Powers 1984: 319.

76 Note, among many other formal elements, the choice of Śaṅkarābharaṇam rāga

Shāhaji Abhayāmbā *kṛtis*, and then beyond these works to the poetic exemplars I have briefly mentioned: the Telugu *Vasu-caritramu*, the Tamil Tāyumāṇavar verses, the large corpus of Tañjāvūr *padams*, the operatic works of Aruṇācalakkavirāyar and others, and back at least as far as the *Tevāram* hymns of the mid-first-millennium). We witness something of this intertextuality in the selection of *rāgas* and their internal ordering and also in the increasingly standardized *sañcāras* and *saṅgatis* that became hallmarks of these *rāgas* and the key to their recognition. Relevant to this notion of a thick intertextual web is the often iconic syntax of the verses that rework and cite classical Tantric sources (very noticeable in our set in the convoluted composita of the Kalyāṇi and Kedāram songs: in the latter, the Kuṇḍalinī is effectively awakened and raised upward through the subtle *cakras* in the course of the performance of the long *caraṇa* verse).

Finally, we have the new generic format assumed by the *kīrtana* or *kṛti*, now the prime genre of classical Carnatic music. The ecology of musical genres has been reorganized, and the Dīkṣitar *kīrtana* assumes a distinctive place. T.M. Krishna has defined the change as follows, contrasting Dīkṣitar with Tyāgarāja: “He [Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar] has looked at the whole kirtana as one body of melodic movement. This makes comprehension of the composition more difficult, because even within one section, many melodic movements end only after a few āvartanas or lines of sahitya. The raga flows in a very unstructured manner...[and] reveals itself as one composite form. The feeling that one gets from a Muttusvami Dikshitar kirtana is of a melody with numerous nuances slowly moving across octaves, unraveling the raga.”<sup>77</sup> Such unraveling—an appropriate and suggestive term—is also an element of the new grammar and a necessary feature integrating the utterance as a whole. Again, we might identify this principle as “modern” in a way that recalls developments in both Tamil and Telugu poetry from the early-modern period.

5. *Shamanic modernism*. So who, or what, is this composer who shifted away from the traditional performance contexts of temple and court to the new middle-class salons, re-imagining the nature of his artistic enterprise in the process? He is a practicing Tantrika, no doubt of that. I have used the word “shamanic” to suggest something of his non-conventional nature as well as the metaphysical processes operating in his works. The Śrī-vidyā in its Kāveri Delta forms was committed to the dehabitation of normative

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for the instrumental-case composition in both sets.

77 T.M. Krishna, *A Southern Music*, 99.

perception and to dramatic movement through inner space, the very heart of Tantric praxis, in the interests of what Garb has called “revitalization”<sup>78</sup> of collective experience—a modernist move *par excellence*. Stated differently, the quite miraculous transformation that Dīkṣitar has achieved now allows an audience of active, attuned listeners to enter the deep, transitional states of musical meditation, still pragmatic in effect (if one knows how to listen), not as initiated practitioners but as concert-goers focused on artistic and poetic experience. I have argued that Dīkṣitar detached the *kṛti* from its more traditional ritual foundations—still predominant in his father’s compositions for the Tiruvārūr temple—and, in the particular sense suggested above, secularized it; and that the normative *mantric* praxis of the Śrī-vidyā, like other Tantric systems, has been neutralized or transposed into a new idiom, one which remains *mantric* and effective, though not in the older causal mode.

One could describe this process, historically, as a new, third-phase Kaula reformation, in the Tamil milieu, that is, a far-reaching domestication of an antinomian Tantric ritual order and its normative extension into a middle-class, semi-secular setting. “Third phase”—after the original Kaula revolution in late first-millennium Kashmir and the re-appearance of a radical Kaulism in the Kaveri region in the two or three generations preceding Muttusvāmi. The localized third-phase Kaulism allowed for Tantric praxis in a universally accessible mode of listening-and-seeing by, or within, the silent, contemplative, yet awake and active mind.

None of this could have happened without the personalization of experience and creative form that Dīkṣitar exemplifies. He is, I think, the first of the great Carnatic composers to mold the melodic line into an entirely personal, non-repeatable, always recognizable emotional statement, highlighting the integrity of the melody in its individual, context-sensitive, mood-sensitive character and texture and re-structuring the *kīrtana* form to suit this melodic unity seen as a whole (or as a stable base for further experimentation). Precisely in this sense—as exemplifying the uniquely personal sensibility that we call “modern” and reshaping the available forms to express this individualist stance—Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar joins the series of early-modern innovators in other domains, above all literature (but also painting), beginning over two centuries before him with Annamayya of Tirupati and the great Telugu and Tamil proto-novelists of

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78 Garb, *Shamanic Trance*, 3.

Vijayanagara, Penukonda, Nandyala, and Tenkasi. To this personal sensibility Dīkṣitar brought, not by chance, the living legacy of Tantric Yoga and its practices of transformative visualization. Again in a comparative vein, we are seeing here the south Indian equivalent of a much wider historical pattern, identified and analyzed by the late Shmuel Eisenstadt,<sup>79</sup> in which the roots of characteristically modernist movements (Jacobism, revolutionary socialism, existentialism) are found not in the proximate intellectual and social antecedents of these movements but in ancient and medieval heterodoxies or esoteric currents (Gnosticism, Stoa, millenarian movements, and so on). Dīkṣitar is modern insofar as he remains a practicing Tantrika, entirely continuous with the Tañjāvūr varieties of the non-dualist Śrī-vidyā yet capable of applying its ritual and meditative praxis to a radically changed, universalized setting.

Pragmatic, personal and lyrical, secular in a special way, heavily intertextual, inherently effectual, largely iconic (on several levels) in its expressive style, thoroughly grammaticalized in a set of novel meta- rules, experimental in form and aim, recontextualized for a new audience, thus already modern in many ways—such is the music idiom of Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar. We may not recognize it as such in the concert halls, almost two centuries after the death of the composer, but such is the fate of revolutions as they become the norm.

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<sup>79</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution. The Jacobin Dimension of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56-61.



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## ABOUT THE GONDA LECTURE 2013

The J. Gonda Fund Foundation of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences supports the scholarly study of Sanskrit, other Indian languages and literature, and Indian cultural history. The Fund is a legacy of Indologist Jan Gonda, who was a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Each year the Gonda Fund organises and publishes the Gonda Lecture.

The Twenty-first Gonda Lecture was held in 2013 by David Shulman, Professor of Indian languages and literature and a cultural historian of Southern India at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, on the major composer of Carnatic music at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar.



